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Homeland Security as International Security? The Case for International Relations as Disciplinary Model

Marcus Holmes

Abstract

This article joins the growing debate regarding the current and future state of the homeland security affairs discipline. This debate has asked questions about what the discipline should be studying, how those studies should be conducted, and where the discipline should move in the future. I argue that many of these debates have focused on methodology; this is putting the cart before the horse. Homeland security needs to concern itself with questions of ontology and epistemology before it can tackle methodology. I illustrate why these questions are vital and suggest ways in which they may be approached. Ultimately I suggest that the discipline of International Relations offers useful insights here as a disciplinary model as it has self-consciously asked, and answered, these same questions through a series of sustained debates. The article concludes by investigating what a IR-inspired homeland security affairs discipline might look like.

KEYWORDS: international relations, homeland security, ontology, epistemology, discipline, definitions, cost-benefit, models, development, homeland security affairs, great debates

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Introduction

One of the recent concerns in the development of the homeland security affairs (HSA) discipline is precisely what the research agenda for the discipline should include (Inamete 2006; Bellavita 2008a; Bellavita 2008b; McCreight 2009; McDermott 2010; Bellavita 2011; McCreight 2011; Kiltz 2011; Ripberger 2011; Alperen 2011). That is, what should the study of HSA consist of, how should that study be conducted, and on what existing discipline, if any, should the fledgling field of HSA model itself? Previous studies have suggested a synthetic and problem-based approach, focusing on three key challenges that include the risk of politicization of the discipline, the importance of psychological factors, and the non-state nature of the adversary (cf. McDermott 2010). These analyses address the important question of *how* HSA should be studied. That is, the focus is on methodology and to a certain extent epistemology. In this article I address a slightly different, but ultimately equally important disciplinary question: the *what* of HSA. What are the threats to homeland security? What does it mean to have a secure homeland? What does it mean to be “safe”? How we answer these questions will help us to understand how homeland security should be studied. I will therefore argue that identifying the unit of analysis in the HSA discipline, or the ontological question, is an important precursor to the methodological question.

I will suggest in this article that international relations (IR) offers a useful model for the HSA discipline because, from its origins as a field, it has self-consciously asked questions about not only methods, but ontology and epistemology as well. As such, it has developed, through often contentious and heated “great” debates, sophisticated understandings of what the international system is comprised of (ontology), how knowledge of that system can be generated (epistemology), and the methods by which research on it should be conducted (methodology). These are, I suggest, precisely the types of debates HSA needs to have as it finds its way as a discipline. Therefore, I argue that, in asking what kind of discipline HSA should be, we should consider IR as a reasonable and useful disciplinary model to follow. What I am *not* arguing is that HSA be subsumed into IR. Rather, IR should serve as a useful source of inspiration for HSA development.

The article will proceed as follows. First, I will make the case for what HSA can learn from IR’s historical development as a discipline. Next, I will address criticisms of the IR approach that have been raised in the literature. Finally, I will conclude by suggesting what an IR-inspired HSA discipline might look like, particularly from the perspective of multiple levels of analysis.

Ontology and Epistemology

At its most basic level, ontology simply refers to the question of what exists or, more usually, what is important. We all carry around implicit ontologies with us as we all make assumptions about what exists, and is important, in the world. For philosophers, ontology forms a set of important questions regarding the nature of reality and the meaning of being. For HSA scholars and analysts, ontology prompts a set of less metaphysical questions: What is the nature of the threats that face the homeland? What is the nature of safety? What does it mean to be safe? While these questions may seem obvious at first, whether they are asked at all and how they are answered can have significant research implications. Mueller and Stewart (2011) put the problem succinctly:

In seeking to evaluate the effectiveness of the massive increases in homeland security expenditures since the terrorist attacks on the United States of September 11, 2001, the common and urgent query has been “are we safer?” This, however, is the wrong question. Of course we are “safer”— the posting of a single security guard at one building’s entrance enhances safety, however microscopically. The correct question is “are the gains in security worth the funds expended?”

Whether the relevant question should be “are we safer?” or “are the gains in security worth the funds expended” is really a claim about ontology. The answers depend on what one believes is important with respect to homeland security. Perhaps more importantly, ontologies often suggest which questions are asked and studied. In this case, one will only ask if the incremental benefits of safety outweigh the incremental costs *if* one has a conception of homeland security that includes monetary concerns.

These types of ontological questions also extend to the nature of the threats as well. Perhaps the primary nature of the threat to homeland security is non-state actors such as terrorist groups (cf. Lewis 2006). Others may argue that it is the states themselves that arm and fund non-state terrorist groups. Still others may suggest that the important elements of HSA threats are ultimately material: chemicals, weapons of mass destruction (WMDs), and so forth. Finally, others may believe that the threat is ideational and social, such as extremist ideology.

As Alfred North Whitehead argued, “[n]o science can be more secure than the unconscious metaphysics which tacitly it presupposes” (cited in Wendt 1999: 370). In other words, we depend on these metaphysical assumptions in order to both make sense of the world and learn about what we believe is important. The reason ontologies are important is what follows from them. If the study of HSA

tacitly presupposes that threats are constituted by ideology, then what follows from that presumption may be quite different than if we presuppose threats as constituted by material such as weapons. Certainly how we go about studying and building knowledge about response to these threats will be different as well. Thus, epistemology and methodology flow, at least to a certain extent, from decisions and assumptions that are made about the nature of HSA threats. Without debating the nature of the threats, we find it difficult to know how to study them.

IR is a useful model in this regard because it has self-consciously debated, and re-debated, the ontologies on which its theories are based. Many approaches to explaining international outcomes have looked to the “structure” of the system for inspiration. For instance, structural realism suggests that observable qualities of the states in the system, mainly their capabilities, explain and predict how states will behave within the system. Kenneth Waltz, for instance, argues that without a sovereign authority, the capabilities of states create a “set of constraining conditions” that act “through socialization of the actors and through competition among them” (1979: 74). As a result, states that may be very different domestically will tend to act similarly and predictably at the international level. Behaviors such as balancing the capabilities of other states through alliances, weaker states bandwagoning with stronger states, and so forth, are all predictable based on how the structure is defined. The ontology that Waltz specifically and neorealists generally are working with is one where the system is composed of states as the main actors, and the “stuff” of international politics is the distribution of capabilities.

Others question this ontology entirely. Constructivists, for instance, suggest that it is not so much the distribution of capabilities, but rather the distribution of ideas that matter. They argue that capabilities alone are indeterminate with respect to outcomes; rather, what matters is what the capabilities *mean*. As Alexander Wendt argues, 500 British nuclear weapons are a lot less threatening to the United States than 5 North Korean ones (1999: 255). The reason is that it is not the distribution of the capabilities that makes a difference, but rather what that distribution might mean for states. This is a claim about the ontology of the system. What matters, in short, is not the material, but rather the ideas we share in our heads regarding that material. Further, some may question the basic ontological presumption that states are the most important actors in the system. Marxists, for example, privilege class, while others privilege firms and corporations.

The benefit of opposing viewpoints on questions of ontology is that they force debate on an important question: what should we be studying? In IR the answer to that question is quite different if one adopts a neorealist ontology or a constructivist one. In HSA this is a debate that has yet to sufficiently take place. To be sure, scholars have focused on different types of threats, and how they are

constituted, and thus have provided implicit ontologies. However, until a more systematic discussion of what we should be analyzing takes place, it is unclear how the field should progress. As mentioned above, this is because *how* one studies a question depends precisely on *what* that question is. Epistemology and methods flow directly from ontology.

Further, the IR experience suggests that there need not be singular answers to these debates – multiple approaches can flourish. As Rose McDermott (2010) argues in a recent piece on homeland security methodology, in IR there is “often rigid nature and parochial attachment that many scholars embrace toward a few well-established dominant paradigms in the field.” While this attachment can be viewed in a negative sense, it can also be viewed as precisely the type of disciplinary development that is necessary for progress. These entrenched paradigms, which often have opposing views on both ontology and epistemology, must compete with each other as research programs, attempting to reach what Imre Lakatos (cf. Lakatos 1978a; Lakatos 1978b; Elman 2002) termed “progressive,” marked by growth, stunning new developments and explanations, and new techniques. Ultimately this competition results in the discipline creating strong foundational knowledge that marks progress.

Lastly, the IR experience is different from other social science disciplines in one important way, suggesting that it is a particularly suitable candidate for disciplinary model. From its inception, IR developed largely as a *prescriptive* and *normative* enterprise. The goal of early theorists was not only to understand and explain outcomes in the international system, such as war, but to provide recommendations in order to make war less likely. Indeed, the field developed in the wake of World War I as theorists attempted to find a way to prevent another war from occurring. In the words of Steve Smith (1987), “It was prescriptive, normative, and based on a conception of scholarly activity that stressed the immediate policy relevance of the work, [which] led to the discipline being concerned above all with devising procedures and techniques to assist rational decision makers to avoid war” (7). This places IR in something of a unique position in the social sciences since it sought not only to understand outcomes, but also to make them less likely to occur. Importantly, this is precisely what developed in HSA largely after 9/11 as an academic endeavor to make such an outcome less likely to occur (cf. Supinski 2011). Thus, HSA and IR share an important prescriptive and normative characteristic.

In a recent review essay of the HSA field, Christopher Bellavita lamented that “if homeland security is to become a useful academic and professional discipline, it has to demonstrate how looking at enduring problems through a homeland security framework adds significant value not provided by other disciplines” (2011). One of the major problems that Bellavita identifies is that the field has not, to date, been able to “clarify the foundational knowledge” that needs

to be applied to “the set of problems the discipline does and should work on: what we know about causes, consequences, and approaches to addressing those issues” (ibid). This claim about the lack of clarified knowledge stems directly from the ontological problem discussed above. Precisely because HSA has not clarified what needs to be studied, it cannot clarify how it should be studied.

If it is assumed that debate does take place, the likely result will be a number of different ontologies with associated epistemologies that aid in developing knowledge about causes and consequences. In IR this occurred with the above mentioned ontological commitments. Neorealists tended to favor a positivist epistemology of natural science, while constructivists tended to favor a post-positivist or interpretive epistemology. The rationale for this bifurcation is that the entities to be studied in both approaches differ, and therefore the way we learn about them is different as well. Consider positivism’s distinction between objects and subjects. Objects are material things like weapons, minerals, and so forth. They do not depend on ideas to function, nor do they require anything remotely close to consciousness in order to function. Subjects, on the other hand, are complicated by things like meaning, ideas, and so forth. These types of things are arguably more difficult to study from a natural science perspective and thus require a different approach regarding what we can learn about them. This distinction between those who think material is important and those who think ideas are important leads to two very different arguments about what the study of IR should look like.

Criticisms of the IR Approach

The notion that HSA should model itself on IR is not without its criticisms. A number of important critiques and reasons to be skeptical about the use of IR in HSA have been voiced. These critiques can be grouped into four major concerns. First, as McDermott (2010) points out, the dominant paradigms within the field of IR are entrenched, reducing meaningful debate. Second, IR traditionally has eschewed study of individuals and individual psychology in favor of structural theorizing, a move that would seem to be quite problematic given HSA’s concerns with the psychological motives of terrorism. Third, IR tends to be focused on interstate relations. That is, the level of analysis is the international systemic level. HSA, on the other hand, necessarily requires levels of analysis at the domestic and local levels. McDermott points out that HSA requires theories of *local* action, whereas IR has concerned itself mostly with *international* action. Finally, and most theoretically, it may be that homeland security is simply a different type of endeavor, one that has grown organically as an interaction between state and private enterprise, and this represents a fundamental distinction from IR, which has grown largely absent of private intervention. These are

important questions about ontology and epistemology and will be dealt with individually.

While IR does remain entrenched in particular dominant paradigms of thought, this need not mean problematic truncation of debate. On the contrary, the existence of entrenched paradigms and positions often signifies the health of a cohesive field. Andrew Abbott (2001) has theorized that ultimately what holds a discipline together is the existence of these paradigms or debates. In Abbott's view, having these debates that are recognizable to others in the field leads to growth; in order to engage with the field, we do not have to create brand new arguments. Rather, we can join in on ongoing debate and conversation, making contributions within and between positions. This suggests that we view a field with entrenched paradigms as one that has reached a significant level of development. Put another way, the field of HSA should *seek* the point where there are well-defined paradigms of study and entrenched positions within and between those paradigms.

One of the entrenched perspectives in IR that may seem problematic for HSA is the dominance of rational choice models within the discipline. Rational choice, or rationalism, is not a substantive theory *of* IR, but rather constitutes a methodological approach *to* social and political analysis and to explanation (Fearon and Wendt 2002). It posits a number of assumptions, including actors engaged in an interaction where they rationally choose options and courses of action in light of their own beliefs, aliefs (cf. Gendler 2008), desires, and interests. The concern for HSA is that rational choice models, by eschewing psychological factors, might not be well-suited to studying the underlying motives of terrorists and terrorism, for instance. This is a compelling critique and two responses are worth mentioning.

First, while IR may be dominated by rational choice *approaches*, it is not the case that IR *theory* has ignored psychological factors. James Goldgeier and Philip Tetlock (2001) point out that, while many macro-level theories of IR explicitly ignore psychological factors, they often implicitly rely on them to motivate the theory. "We discover that their capacity to explain relevant trends or events hinges on a wider range of implicit psychological assumptions that it is useful to make explicit. In this sense, these macro theorists are already more psychological than they think" (67-68). Thus, from this perspective IR theory is in some sense *based* on psychological principles. In addition, recent work by political psychologists has brought psychology and cognitive biases to the forefront of theorizing. While historically IR theory has concerned itself with structure of the international system, with psychology taking a more subtle backseat, psychology now offers diverse approaches and theories in IR from decision-making (cf. Levy 1997; McDermott 2004a; McDermott 2004b; Mercer 2005a; Mercer 2005b; Mercer 2006; Hopf 2010), to identity (cf. Herrmann et al.

2004; Mitzen 2006), and the structure and dynamics of the international system itself (Rosen 2007; Rathbun 2009; Wendt 2010). These analyses have become increasingly sophisticated and have utilized new research findings from neuroscience to make arguments about how the brain interacts with the political environment (McDermott 2004b; Hopf 2010; Holmes 2011a). In other words, as IR has developed as a discipline, it has increased its reliance on psychology, a development that would be useful for HSA as well.

Second, while rational choice has dominated IR approaches, and within the IR discipline this is viewed with mixed emotion, it may be the case that HSA could benefit from *more* rational analysis within the discipline. For instance, as John Mueller and Mark Stewart have pointed out, one of the key problems with respect to applying risk assessment and cost-benefit approaches to HSA topics has been probability neglect (cf. Sunstein 2003; Mueller 2006; Mueller and Stewart 2011), the tendency to assume worst-case scenario thinking when it comes to security concerns. Mueller and Stewart cite a risk analyst at the RAND Corporation on probability neglect:

When I spoke about the terrorist threat, especially in the first years after 2001, I was often asked what people could do to protect their family and home. I usually responded by giving the analyst's answer, what I labeled "the RAND answer." Anyone's probability of being killed by a terrorist today was essentially zero and would be tomorrow, barring a major discontinuity. So, they should do nothing. It is not surprising that the answer was hardly satisfying, and I did not regard it as such (Treverton 2009, 24-25).

As Gregory Treverton notes, "People want information, but the challenge for government is to warn without terrifying" (ibid, 188). While there have been some rationalist studies of costs and benefits that attempt to remove psychological factors from the analysis, one of the key contributions HSA can make is placing emphasis on the probabilities of attack when assessing costs and benefits of policies to prevent or respond to them.

Further, since IR tends to focus on interstate relations, it may not be clear how this emphasis could be useful for HSA, which concerns itself with multiple levels of analysis, including the local, state, and international. Indeed, at some level HSA represents the nexus between international and homeland security. While IR predominantly studies the relations between states, it has long studied the determinants of those relations, many of which exist at the domestic or even local levels. For instance, Robert Putnam's work (1988) on "two-level games" suggested that conflict resolution at the international level often involves simultaneous negotiations at the international level between states and at the

domestic level between interest groups and coalitions. Two-level games have become increasingly important for both IR theorizing and empirical analyses as scholars recognize that outcomes at the international level cannot always be explained through just interstate factors.

Recent work in IR has extended two-level games to more complex structural arrangements. Some scholars have begun to suggest that the international system can have many diverse arrangements, including heterarchically with lower levels of analysis influencing higher levels and vice versa (cf. Donnelly 2009; Holmes 2011b). This is in contrast to more traditional models where the international system is characterized in hierarchical terms. The relevance for HSA is that it is precisely this type of interaction and interdependence of levels, where the local affects the international and the international affects the local, which HSA needs to incorporate into its analyses. Just as IR has moved beyond interstate analyses, HSA will likely need to move beyond single level studies.

Finally, some may consider homeland security a fundamentally different enterprise or scholarly endeavor from IR. In the case of the former, HSA has developed somewhat organically as an interaction between public and private forces where both are at work attempting to answer questions of ontology and epistemology. IR, on the other hand, has been a largely scholarly endeavor and indeed one of the criticisms often voiced is that it is too detached from policy-making (Walt 2005; Walt 2011). On the other hand, questions of international security have long developed in conjunction with private enterprise. Think tanks, public policy centers, and other private organizations continue to play a large role in international security discourse and analysis. While it is likely true that private firms play a larger role in HSA, as they often have a very strong interest in policy-decisions, the same is likely true in IR as well, though perhaps to a lesser extent. Therefore, it would be a mistake, I argue, to suggest that HSA is a fundamentally different enterprise that cannot profit from using IR as a disciplinary model because of its public-private partnerships since international security affairs have exhibited many of the same types of partnerships.

Conclusion

This article has argued that, as a fledgling discipline, the development of homeland security as a field of study faces a number of central questions. What should the discipline be studying? How should those studies be conducted? What discipline, if any, should HSA model itself upon? I have suggested that answering these questions requires taking a stance on ontology; epistemology and methodology will follow. From this perspective, the argument for modeling the development of HSA on the development of IR becomes clear. IR followed a

similar trajectory, with great debates regarding ontology, epistemology, and methodology characterizing its development. While there are legitimate concerns with subsuming HSA into IR, there is less of an argument, I have suggested, for using a similar approach to homeland security as has been used in international security.

The theory presented here implies a number of important research questions. First, while I have bracketed the argument that HSA should not be subsumed *into* IR, further analysis on this subject is necessary. If HSA and IR share important epistemological, ontological, and methodological perspectives and realities, then it is not immediately clear why such a move would be unwarranted. Second, if IR is to serve as a disciplinary model then it may be worthwhile asking what particular aspects of the field should be included in such a model. One area of growing importance in IR is diplomacy, often understood as the non-violent pursuit and practice of international politics. That is, diplomacy may be the oil in the machine of IR. What is the corollary, if any, between international diplomacy and homeland security diplomacy? One potential route of exploration would be broadening the conceptualization of diplomacy, perhaps in align with what Constantinou (2006) has called “homo-diplomacy,” the notion that diplomacy, in its essence, is the interpersonal relations between human beings that occurs at multiple levels. This sufficiently broad definition could be applied to individuals working in and around HSA in a particularly fruitful way. Finally, IR scholars have recently problematized the notion of “foreign” and “foreignness,” particularly with respect to foreign policy. That is, what is the process by which states and other actors conceptualize what is foreign (Constantinou and Hellmann 2011)? Given the importance in the HSA discipline of defining threats, including those of a foreign nature, this debate may have significant relevance for homeland security.

Ultimately, the path on which HSA forges ahead will have substantial ramifications for how policy is constructed, what scholars of HSA study, what is taught in undergraduate and graduate programs, and so forth. Because there is so much at stake, it is worthwhile, at this juncture, for the discipline to self-reflect on where it has been, where it is headed, and what model, if any, it should follow in the process.

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